

Biddy Mason

Sometimes it seemed they would never stop traveling. First there had been the long trip to Utah. All day Biddy had walked along behind the wagons, tending the cattle. For months they walked, getting farther and farther from Mississippi. It was a hard trip, especially for her children. But what could Biddy do? She was born a slave. She was a slave today. Her master told her to walk across the plains and she did it.

They had stayed in Utah only one year. Then word came of a new settlement in southern California. Robert Smith decided to go. Again the wagons were packed. Again they began the long days of walking.

Biddy had plenty of time for thinking along the way. What she mostly thought about was freedom. As a child she had never known a black person who wasn't a slave. Oh, she heard about them, about the ones who escaped to the North. But it was so hard to imagine!

Then came the trip west. Things were different here. She had seen families, *black families*, traveling west with their own wagons! Just think of it! They planned to find their own land, start their own farms, or find work in the towns. Biddy had thought about them for days.

Biddy looked down at her bare feet. They were tired and sore and covered with dust. "These feet walked every mile from Mississippi," she thought. "And they remembered every step. They have walked for Mr. Smith and his family. They have walked after his crops and his wagons and his cattle. But someday these feet are going to walk for me. Someday these feet will walk me to freedom. I'm sure of it."

A few days later, the tired travelers arrived at San Bernardino, California. It was a lovely place. It was their new home.

There were many reasons to enjoy living in California in 1852. The climate was pleasant. The land was good. The air was fresh and warm. Cities were booming. Everywhere there was a sense of promise and excitement.

The most important thing for Biddy was the promise of freedom. She had heard people talking. The new state of California did not permit slavery, they said. By law, all people here were free. Biddy looked again at her dusty traveling feet. "Soon," she said to herself, "soon."

Three years passed. Life was pretty good, but Mr. Smith must have loved traveling. Even this beautiful settlement could not hold him. He decided to move again, this time to Texas. The wagons were loaded and made ready to go.

Biddy knew she had to act. As soon as the wagons left San Bernardino, she began looking for an opportunity. She found one. Somehow she sent word to the sheriff in Los Angeles. He stopped the wagons before they left California.

"I hear you have slaves in your party," said the sheriff. "I suppose you know that's against the law. Is it true?" Biddy came forward. In all her life this was the first time she had ever spoken to a white sheriff. Still her voice was strong. "It is true," she said. "Mr. Smith is taking us to Texas and we don't want to go."

That statement led to the most important slavery trial in southern California. Biddy spoke to the judge, and her words were strong and clear: "I want to stay in California. I want to be free."

The judge sided with Biddy. He scolded Mr. Smith for breaking the law. He gave all the slaves their freedom.

Biddy gathered up her children and said, "We are moving once more, but it won't be very far. We are going to Los Angeles, and this time," she said looking at her tired feet, "I am walking for me!"

She started her new life by taking as her full name Biddy Mason. She went to work as a nurse and a housekeeper. Before long she had saved enough money to buy a house. Soon she bought other property too. Biddy Mason was a good businesswoman. She became one of the wealthiest blacks in Los Angeles.

She shared that wealth with others. She gave land to build schools and hospitals and nursing homes. She supported the education of black children and helped people in need. Biddy Mason had come a long way from that slave's cabin in Mississippi. She still remembered the walking. And she made sure she helped others along their way.

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